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Some Psychological Characteristics of the Delaware Indians during the 17th and 18th Centuries

ANTHONY F. C. WALLACE

INTRODUCTION

IT is difficult for the archaeologist, when he lifts from the dirt a fragment of pottery, a bone awl, a projectile point, to have much feeling for the people of whom these relics are the sole material remains. Unavoidably, in the pages of archaeological reports, a people of the past is only a hollow-sounding name identified with a certain style of pottery or a certain type of flint-knapping. It is as if, a thousand years hence, scientists were able to say of ourselves no more than, "The inhabitants of Pennsylvania, about the year 1950 A.D., made many roads and buildings out of concrete; they also used metals extensively, and presumably had an elaborate social and ceremonial organization. . . ."

- 12.1 In this paper I shall try to tease out from the fragmentary historical accounts surviving from the period of colonization, some description of what kind of people the Delaware Indians were, psychologically. This reconstruction must inevitably be sketchy, inadequate, and mistaken in many ways which can never be discerned; and, of course, it does not reach back into the ages before white men came to America. But it is as clear a picture, in terms of modern psychological theory, as we can get of the Delawares as people, in that already clouded past from which such glimpses as these, and the lonely fragments of stone, pottery, and bone that the archaeologist uncovers, are the sole surviving evidences.

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Some Psychological Characteristics of the Delaware Indians during the 17th and 18th Centuries

ANTHONY F. C. WALLACE

INTRODUCTION

THE RELATION OF PARENTS TO CHILDREN

Data on the relationship of the mother to the infant and child are meager, but they suggest that the mother was, in addition to her role as provider and protector, the agent of considerable frustration. This frustration, however, was not so recurrently severe as it was continuous. Instead of presenting the infant with any sudden major crisis, the mother was consistently indifferent to a number of particular lesser demands.

Parents may have had some unconscious hostility to the new-born child: certain compulsive rituals had to be performed to prevent "wandering ghosts" from stealing away the soul of the infant.¹ The baby was, from birth until it was able to walk, bound to a cradle-board, from which it was normally released only for sanitary administrations. The mother nursed the child by picking it up with the board.² It was often left alone, on the board, swinging upright from a tree limb, while the mother worked in the corn-field or did other outdoor tasks. Many children are reported to have died while propped up in the board against a bench or wall in the houses. "The children by pushing and kicking not infrequently tumbled themselves into the fire or other danger and thus miserably perished, or were severely burned," observed

1. Harrington, 1938, p. 129.

2. Lindestrom, 1656, p. 201.

3. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 85-86.

4. Lindestrom, 1656, p. 202.

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155 Zeisberger.⁵ Infants were described by
 854 Lindestrom as never crying.⁶ Whether
 this was because they were nursed when-
 ever restless (which is most likely), or
 because the crying was consistently ignored
 in early infancy, is not clear from the
 available accounts. From Zeisberger's
 description of the frequency of the mother's
 absence, it would seem that, even if the
 child were nursed on demand when she
 was available, her frequent absences must
 have meant to the child that she was an
 862 undependable provider. Children were
 weaned at the age of two or three; the
 techniques are not described.⁷ Anal and
 863 urethral training do not seem to have been
 strenuous: boys wore no clothes at all until
 [241] the age of five or six, although girls wore
 aprons as soon as they could walk.⁸

861 Zeisberger noted that children were
 155 sometimes harshly treated, although such
 behavior generally produced in them "bit-
 terness, hatred and contempt." He went
 on to say, "The women are frequently
 guilty of thus raising their children to
 anger, for the women are often ill-tempered.
 By way of punishment, they will pour
 water on the children or thrust them into
 the water."⁷ Zeisberger did not like the
 Indian women, whom he described also
 [157] as being "much given to lying and gossip-
 181] ing. They carry evil report from house to
 house. As long as they are observed they
 appear modest and without guile. All the
 wrongs of which they are guilty are done
 114 in secret."⁸ While one may be inclined to
 747 discount Zeisberger's accusations on the
 grounds of the natural prejudice of a male
 missionary among somewhat more aggres-
 sive women than he was probably
 accustomed to at home, the general ac-
 curacy of his observations and the fact
 that he was really fond of his charges, with
 whom he spent much of his active life,
 suggest that he had imbibed the prevalent
 native male attitude toward the women of
 the tribe.

5. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 80.

6. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 17.

7. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 81.

8. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 124.

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- 581 Divorce and family instability were
 586 common; many children were raised by
 mother surrogates. "Owing to instability
 of the family relationship, children are
 581 often neglected."⁹ The father was absent,
 855 hunting, fishing, fighting, trading, or
 attending treaties during most of the year;
 what discipline there was fell to the hand
 of the mother, who was considered to
 796 "own" the children.¹⁰ During one of the
 861 annual calendar of ceremonies, young
 children were chased by a man dressed in
 a bear-skin, who threatened to punish them
 for misdeeds (of which the parents kept
 him informed from year to year) by carry-
 ing them away in a bag full of snakes.¹¹
 [776] This "Mask Spirit" was considered to be
 the "Guardian of the Game" and also
 promoted the fertility of the corn; in other
 words, was the symbol of the food-pro-
 855 vider.¹² The boys were able to escape from
 the mother's supervision as soon as they
 were able to get about to play at hunting
 and fighting; but the girls were kept around
 the house to help the mother at work.¹³
 754 When a child died, an old woman was
 often accused of having bewitched it.¹⁴

- 155 It would seem that the mother-figure
 593 remained a symbol of possible delights
 which could not be secured on demand, a
 symbol of diffused frustration, of withheld
 benefits and hidden hostility, to the
 Delaware, and the source of his generalized,
 if inhibited, aggressiveness; and that the
 father-figure stood on the horizon, so to
 speak, as a powerful, friendly being, but
 one too remote and too aloof to be depended
 upon.

EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS IN MATURITY

- 584 The ideal in marriage was for a young
 man to fall in love with a girl. His family
 would present his suit; she would accept
 [585] him by accepting the presents he sent, and
 come to live with him; and they would live
 happily and faithfully ever after. The

9. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 21.

10. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 14.

11. Harrington, 1938, pp. 52-53, 113.

12. *Ibid.*; Harrington, 1921.

13. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 16.

14. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 128.

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584 marriage would furthermore be congenial
 to the parents of both parties.¹⁵ In practice
 586 these marriages usually broke up quickly,
 both spouses quickly being unfaithful to
 one another.¹⁶ Occasionally a man, his
 [762] pride wounded by a wife's infidelity,
 directed his helpless anger inward and
 committed suicide by taking poison.
 Women too killed themselves out of
 jealousy.¹⁷ The shifting romantic attach-
 ments of both sexes seem to represent an
 unending striving to find the all-satisfying
 parent: a striving continually doomed to
 frustration.

787 The guardian spirit relationship (which
 was sought by both men and women)
 seems also to be built upon the prototype
 of the search for the all-satisfying (but not
 authoritarian) parent.¹⁸

572 Among men there was an institution of
 "friendship" which focused considerable
 emotion upon a relationship of formally
 recognized mutual dependency, in war, in
 the chase, and in various other life-crises.¹⁹
 [521] Men were more at ease with one another
 [562] in conversation than with women and,
 according to Zeisberger, would automati-
 cally suspect as a lie any tale which they
 [593] heard from a woman.²⁰ It was a common
 saying, "My wife is not my friend."²¹ Old
 989 women were accused by the men of being
 439 the middlemen who carried the socially
 disrupting rum from white settlements to
 the villages.²²

562 Implicit in all this was the assumption
 571 on the part of all Delawares—men and
 women alike—that relationships with
 women, while they could be satisfying,
 were not likely to be; and the further
 assumption on the part of men that they
 had less to fear from other men than from

15. Heckewelder, 1819, p. 161; Zeisberger, 1778, p. 79.

16. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 82-83.

17. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 83.

18. Lindstrom, 1656, pp. 207-209; Heckewelder, 1819, pp. 245-246; Zeisberger, 1778, p. 127.

19. Heckewelder, 1819, p. 278; Lindstrom, 1656, p. 233; Zeisberger, 1778, p. 116.

20. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 116.

21. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 99.

22. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 117.

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women, and might safely therefore be more "friendly" with them.

ORAL FIXATION

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There is some evidence to suggest a preoccupation, which had a large component of aggressiveness, with oral needs. This concern with eating (and with other oral phenomena, such as ritualistic pipe-smoking, naming, and oratory), which reached far beyond subsistence requirements, can hardly be ascribed to a realistic subsistence anxiety since the Delawares had ample supplies of animal and vegetable foods at their disposal, and adequate techniques for cultivating, gathering, preserving, and storing them. It is worth mentioning that the pubescent Delaware solicited the favor of a guardian spirit by self-imposed fasting; the spirit was supposed to pity him and appear in a vision; later the spirit would be important to him in helping to secure food.²³ Oral rituals, often with a compulsive quality, were a recurrent institutional theme: almost all

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social gatherings involved eating, smoking, and oratory, and some were frankly eating-orgies—the famous "eat-all" feasts, for example; the fondness for liquor may be regarded as an oral trait of compulsive character;²⁴ internal medicines were usually

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taken as liquid herbal infusions, usually in large doses;²⁵ the sick lived on a liquid diet;²⁶ suicide and witchcraft were both accomplished in most cases by poison taken by mouth;²⁷ tortured prisoners were sometimes ceremonially eaten, and hunger cannibalism was reported;²⁸ war parties made a ceremonial feast the night before their departure;²⁹ emetics were extensively used in the treatment of disease, and vomiting was thought to relieve a sense of guilt, and also to bring luck.³⁰

23. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 132-133.

24. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 116; Heckewelder, 1819, p. 263.

25. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 24-25; Tontoquidgeon.

26. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 24.

27. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 125; Heckewelder, 1819, p. 258.

28. Heckewelder, 1819, p. 199; Zeisberger, 1778, p. 107-108.

29. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 103.

30. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 84, 133-134.

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- 153 Throughout these and other instances there seems to be an association between the concepts of eating and aggression, and between the concepts of not eating (or of giving up food to another, or of relinquishing what has been eaten) and of being accepted, approved, and helped.

THE GUARDIAN SPIRIT

- 156 The Delaware could not support a sense of social disapproval or of disregard. The great importance attached by Europeans to conscience was among the Delawares replaced by an equal importance attached to "face." When self-esteem needed encouragement, the individual dreamed (or interpreted his dreams as meaning) that he was great. Zeisberger remarked, "They are proud and haughty, even a miserable Indian, capable in no respect, imagines himself to be a great lord. They hold themselves in high regard as if they were capable of great and wonderful things, in which respect they are much encouraged by dreams, held among them to be very significant and, indeed, it would appear that through dreams Satan holds the heathen bound and fettered and in close connection with himself, subjecting them in this fashion to delusion. All this the missionaries discover in those who come to church and who need be thoroughly humbled before they give up the vain imaginations concerning themselves."³¹
- [797] One of the main functions of the guardian spirit was to buttress the Delaware's opinion of himself. "They believe," observed Zeisberger, "in numerous spirits or subordinate deities. Almost all animals and the elements are looked upon as spirits, one exceeding the other in dignity and power. There is scarcely an Indian who does not believe that one or more of these spirits has not been particularly given him to assist him and make him prosper. This, they claim, has been made known to them in a dream, even as their religious belief is alleged to have been made known to them in a dream. One has, in a dream,
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31. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 18-19.

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- 156 received a serpent or a buffalo, another the
 787 sun or the moon, another an owl or some
 other bird, another a fish, some even
 ridiculously insignificant creatures such as
 ants. These are considered their spirits or
Manittos. If an Indian has no Manitto to
 be his friend he considers himself forsaken,
 has nothing upon which he may lean, has
 no hope of any assistance and is small in
 his own eyes. On the other hand those
 154 who have been thus favored possess a high
 and proud spirit.³² We shall have further
 occasion to remark how many institutions
 were mobilized to prevent such casual
 wounds to self-esteem. We shall also see
 how much aggression such blows to self-
 esteem could arouse. Heckewelder and
 [762] Zeisberger both mention that suicide was
 a common way of expressing the enormous
 but disorganized hostility aroused by slights
 such as marital infidelity or public
 shaming.³³

ABSENCE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

- 861 Zeisberger and Heckewelder agreed that
 Delaware parents avoided corporal punish-
 ment, scolding, threatening, or otherwise
 disciplining children. Growing boys were
 left pretty much to their own devices.
 Little homilies on moral values were
 addressed to them and the child's pride
 was appealed to in efforts to induce ap-
 593 proved social behavior.³⁴ The father spent
 much of his time away from home in the
 employments of the chase (especially when
 the fur trade added to the importance of
 [462] hunting); the mother was responsible for
 the fundamental subsistence activities. In
 general the male was peripheral, the female
 central in cultural role.³⁵ Delaware women
 562 were described as being given to petty
 [157] meanness, malicious gossip, and lying; but
 they were not "matriarchs" in the sense of
 being the recognized arbiters of the home
 or society. Their evidently enlarged spite-

32. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 132-133.

33. Heckewelder, 1819, pp. 258-260; Zeisberger, 1778, p. 83.

34. Heckewelder, 1819, pp. 113-117; Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 16, 81.

35. Heckewelder, 1819, pp. 154-162; Zeisberger, 1778, p. 13-14.

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562 fulness, in comparison with the men, may
 157 have been owing to the fact that they were
 much more restricted in childhood than
 their brothers. Nowhere in Delaware
 542 society was there the model of anyone
 622 with coercive authority; neither mother nor
 625 father ruled the roost at home in an
 authoritarian sense, the sachems had no
 power to enforce their wishes, and there
 was no conception of a state with police
 586 powers. Divorce was easy and frequent
 and could be initiated by either party
 simply leaving the other.³⁶ Supernatural
 776 beings were not Jehovah-like Gods who
 regularly punished the wicked and re-
 warded the good; the Delaware reckoned
 rather with a supernatural guardian spirit
 who acted as a comrade and friend who
 would assist his mortal protege in critical
 passes. Shame and pride are more frequent
 themes than guilt and self-righteousness;
 577 Speck (referring to twentieth-century
 Oklahoma Delawares) says, "Spiritual
 purity . . . is not conditioned by ethical
 conduct, but rather . . . through the
 observance of taboo regulations prescribed
 by ancient rulings."³⁷

155 It would seem to be a fair inference that
 577 the Delaware often did not develop a
 strong authoritarian, coercive conscience;
 moral values (which certainly were recog-
 nized) did not possess an awesome, mosaic
 character; "good" and "bad" had a light
 affective tone.

114 Zeisberger, who as a Moravian believed
 626 in less discipline and autocracy than was
 fashionable in eighteenth century Europe,
 was still puzzled as to how a society without
 authority could hold together. "Judged by
 the mere appearance of the Indians," he
 wrote, "one is surprised how modest and
 careful they are in relation to each other
 and imagines that the whites, if they were
 as free a people and had neither govern-
 ment nor punishment to fear, would not
 626 be as united and peaceable as the Indians
 appear to be."³⁸ This superficial smooth-

36. Heckewelder, 1819, p. 154; Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 20-21.

37. Speck, 1931, p. 51.

38. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 122.

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626 ness was accomplished, not by a fear of authority, but by everyone's fear of wounding someone else's self-esteem and thereby laying himself open to aggression. In order not to antagonize another, the individual had to be very circumspect in his behavior and avoid showing his own aggressive motives. There were a variety of institutionalized techniques which functioned to forestall possible antagonism-arousing situations. "They are not quarrelsome, and are always on their guard, so as not to offend each other," said Heckewelder, and Zeisberger made similar observations.³⁹

[831] Swearing was unknown (although obscenity was not tabooed).⁴⁰ Persons suspected of ill-doing were not accused openly; public or private disapproval was communicated by subtle allusions or by the recital of a "dream."⁴¹

[601] Strangers and visitors were always treated politely; and negative replies to embassies from other communities were couched in ambiguous terms so that the matter was shelved rather than contended over.⁴²

576 An elaborate code of
521 etiquette governed the men's talk. "Their common conversation turns upon hunting or the news of the day. Matter that has no foundation in fact may be drawn into conversation, and even though all may be aware of this, the narration continues uninterrupted. They may laugh now and again but they will listen attentively. No one interrupts another. When one has finished another begins. They never put any one publicly to blush; they are polite to each other and enjoy being politely treated. They like to be regarded as worthy people even though they may be the opposite. They are pleased to know that they are liked."⁴³

796 Religious observances
776 (such as the periodic obligation to give a dance for a sacred mask) were performed under an almost obsessive fear that negligence, by offending the supernatural owner, would call down an indefinite but

39. Heckewelder, 1819, pp. 145-146; Zeisberger 1778, p. 115-116.

40. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 85.

41. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 120.

42. Heckewelder, 1819, p. 150.

43. Heckewelder, 1819, pp. 103-104; Zeisberger 1778, 115-116.

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[796] crippling revenge.⁴⁴ Even animals, (for
[325] example, the bear) had to be conceptualized as quasi-human beings, engaged in war with the Indians to legitimize their killing.⁴⁵

ANTICIPATION OF AGGRESSION

626 In view of these elaborate cultural
156 devices for avoiding situations where aggressions might come to the surface, either in one's own self or in others, we might expect to find considerable anxiety in everyone over the suspicion that through some slip he might have aroused the hostility of an unknown enemy, especially since in every person there seems to have been a large amount of diffused aggression which could easily be projected onto other
[754] people. The fear of witchcraft, for instance, was universal and demoralizing.⁴⁶ Lindstrom described the Delawares as "mistrustful,"⁴⁷ and both Zeisberger and
[154] Heckewelder remarked on the elaborate institutions which functioned to deflect possible aggression.⁴⁸ Parents explained their reluctance to discipline children by saying that "the children might remember it against them and avenge themselves when they have attained to maturity."⁴⁹ (Zeisberger said that he knew of some cases where children *did* threaten to punish their parents for indignities suffered in childhood.)⁵⁰

TECHNIQUES FOR EXPRESSING AGGRESSION

154 All these mechanisms indicate that the typical Delaware individual harbored within himself exceptionally uncomfortable aggressive impulses which he was afraid to focus on anyone for fear of counter-aggression. The eruption of these aggressions periodically shattered the equable facade of social behavior. "They are able to control their desires and passions," observed Zeisberger, "but once given free

44. Speck, 1931, pp. 39-44.

45. Wollace, 1949.

46. Heckewelder, 1819, pp. 239-240.

47. Lindstrom, 1856, pp. 191-192.

48. Heckewelder, 1819, pp. 103-104; Zeisberger

1778, pp. 115-116.

49. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 81.

50. *Ibid.*

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154 rein these are the more violent."⁵¹ Warfare
 [721] provided a socially approved way of
 bleeding off some of these aggressions, for
 the warriors; and the institution of torture
 154 gave the rest of the community a similar
 727 opportunity. "The Indians flock to these
 executions as to some great solemnity, with
 a view to reeking on the unfortunate
 captive their cruel and revengeful dis-
 154 position."⁵² The institution of blood-
 627 revenge⁵³ (which sometimes led to
 prolonged vendetta) was also an outlet
 for aggression; but the fear of its exercise
 no doubt served also to inhibit it. In
 154 hunting, males could work off aggression
 224 on animals, which were conceptualized as
 quasi-human. It is worth noting that
 among women, who had a more restricted
 childhood and who at the same time had
 154 fewer socially sanctioned outlets for
 521 aggression, the overflow dribbled off in
 562 unpleasant gossip and slander, which the
 men, who had other means of catharsis,
 professed to scorn.⁵⁴

154 All observers agreed that liquor dis-
 273 solved the inhibitions against aggression.
 578 "The effects which intoxication produces
 upon the Indians are dreadful," lamented
 Heckewelder. "It has been the cause of
 an infinite number of murders among
 them, besides biting off noses and otherwise
 disfiguring each other, which are the least
 consequences of the quarrels which in-
 ebriation produces between them."⁵⁵ As
 might be expected, therefore, Indian
 spokesmen frequently—and in vain—
 implored the whites to cease bringing
 liquor into their settlements.

SUMMARY

127 From an examination of the early
 ethnological literature concerning the
 Delaware Indians, we have been able to
 discover some of their psychological
 855 characteristics. The Delawares would
 seem in general to have been a people
 among whom the children grew up

51. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 124-125.

52. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 106-107.

53. Penn, 1683.

54. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 116.

55. Heckewelder, 1819, p. 263.

[P.39, A]

855 receiving from their mothers adequate physical care, especially in early infancy, but that the child did not receive much of what we would call "affection" or "love" and from time to time was neglected and subjected to petty meanness. The father had only intermittent contact with the mother-child nexus, and to the child appeared as a distant potentially loving (and perhaps also potentially threatening), but practically remote figure. Neither parent made use of systematic punishment as an educative technique. The male child grew up into an adult who saw women both as romantic ideals and as untrustworthy and malicious, potentially witches, while men were regarded as potential comrades, toward whom nevertheless highly polite, circumspect behavior was required in order to avoid giving offense. Women grew up to be discreet but covertly malicious wives and mothers. No individual, of either sex was conceived as the possessor of unquestioned authority, and social relations hence were very individualistic and fissionable. There is evidence to suggest that the individual remained somewhat fixed, on an unconscious level, to infantile patterns of "oral" reaction, of a dependent, aggressively demanding nature, although these dependency patterns were masked by a superficial individualism and self-sufficiency, and by careful inhibition of any openly aggressive behavior. The conflict between the dependent and aggressive impulses, on the one hand, and the conscientious efforts to be self-sufficient and unaggressive on the other, was partially resolved by the guardian spirit complex, a technique of personality integration which allowed the adolescent to collect his dependency wishes and displace them onto the fantasy figure of an all-powerful parent. Further relief was afforded by various institutionalized ritual or semi-ritual institutions, such as warfare, feasting, and religion. Liquor, however, was a severe threat to the integrity of the society, since it allowed repressed and sublimated im-

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155 pulses, particularly aggressive ones, to break out into the open, often with socially catastrophic results.

171 It should be observed that in many
155 respects this personality portrait of the Delawares is similar to that drawn, from different sources, by A. I. Hallowell for the Indians of the Northeast in general, and more particularly for the Ojibwa.⁵⁶ Thus Delaware personality is not markedly distinct from that of other Indians in the area, and a closer analysis than is possible here would probably be required to distinguish it from Ojibwa or other Algonkian peoples of the Northeast.

56. Hallowell, 1946.

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